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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN/OSCE: POLITICAL PARTY LEADERS AND MPS

ANALYZE DEMOCRATIZATION AND CORRUPTION WITH USOSCE

AMBASSADOR FINLEY

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ANNE E. DERSE PER 1.4(B,D)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: During a March 28-30 visit to Baku, USOSCE Ambassador Finley met separately with a group of foreign policy Members of Parliament (MPs), female MPs, and political party leaders. The foreign policy MPs expressed a range of views about the level of democracy in Azerbaijan and agreed that corruption presents an obstacle to democratization. The female MPs explained that social issues and education were among their primary interests. They agreed that women have some space to operate in the male-dominated political scene but pointed to the glass ceiling. Leaders from independent and opposition political parties engaged in a robust discussion on the state of democracy in Azerbaijan, concluding that the GOAJ has consistently failed to implement key democratic reforms. The group recognized that Azerbaijan's quest for democracy is the responsibility of Azerbaijanis but emphasized that they need international support to affect real democratic change. END SUMMARY.

FOREIGN POLICY MPS ON DEMOCRACY AND CORRUPTION

¶12. (SBU) On March 29, the Ambassador hosted a dinner in honor of visiting USOSCE Ambassador Finley with a group of foreign policy MPs. Guests included independent MP Azeri Amiraslanov, Deputy Chair of the Economic Policy Commission and member of the U.S.-Azerbaijan Inter-Parliamentary Working Group; independent MP Chingiz Asadullayev, member of the International Relations Commission; and opposition Musavat Party MP Nasib Nassibli, member of the International Relations Commission, member of the U.S.-Azerbaijan Inter-Parliamentary Working group, and former Azerbaijani Ambassador to Iran.

¶13. (C) Ambassador Finley learned that Parliament was ready to strengthen cooperation with the OSCE and other international organizations, like the Council of Europe, that can help implement "institutional reform" in Azerbaijan. However, their views split when it came to democracy in Azerbaijan. Referring to Freedom House's ranking of Azerbaijan as "not free" in its annual Freedom in the World Report, Nassibli said that Azerbaijan cannot be considered democratic. He "feared for Azerbaijan's future" because of the GOAJ's state of euphoria over the oil wealth contrasting its overall bad governance. Amiraslanov disagreed, estimating that Azerbaijan is 75 percent democratic. Asadullayev weighed in, opining that Azerbaijan is more than half democratic. He said that while Azerbaijan has some economic difficulties, the population enjoys many liberties. To fix the situation, Asadullayev said that Parliament must take on more responsibilities.

¶14. (C) Amiraslanov, Asadullayev, and Nassibli agreed that the influx of oil revenue has contributed to corruption.

Nassibli said that while the Azerbaijani people hate corruption those in power in Baku tolerate it. He wished they would be more like their counterparts in Georgia's government who seemed committed to fighting corruption. Asadullayev said that it is important to keep perspective; he argued that corruption has decreased over the past few years, listing as an example the recent police salary raises and consequential decrease in bribery on the streets. According to Asadullayev, Parliament can help fight corruption by creating the necessary legal framework, such as reforming the tax policy and the customs code. Amiraslanov said that the GOAJ needs to up the ante in its anti-corruption efforts, and wage a large-scale battle against corruption. But, he noted, year by year there are improvements.

FEMALE MPS CONCERNED ABOUT CONSTITUENTS' NEEDS

¶ 15. (SBU) On March 30, the Ambassador hosted a lunch in honor of Ambassador Finley with a group of female MPs. Guests included independent MP Lala Abbasova, member of the Science and Education Commission; independent MP Elmira Akhundova, member of the Social Policy Commission; independent MP Jala Aliyeva, member of the Cultural Issues Commission; independent MP Aynur Guliyeva, member of the Cultural Issues Commission and alternate member of Azerbaijan's delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE); and independent MP Govhar Bakhshaliyeva, member of the Science and Education Commission. (NOTE: There are 14 female MPs in the 125-member Parliament, including First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva.)

¶ 16. (C) The group opened by reviewing their work in Parliament and in their constituencies. Akhundova called for more school buildings and supplies and said she encourages girls

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in her district to complete their education. Aliyeva explained that her voters face more basic problems: the lack of sufficient water, gas, and electricity. She also actively promotes preservation of the Azerbaijani language; she is trying to protect it from being influenced too heavily by other languages, notably by proposing a language academy and calling for greater responsibility shown by media editors. Abbasova said that she is involved in many public activities that focus on women's issues, such as an NGO that works to promote girls' education and development of education facilities in remote regions. She solicits funds from businessmen, often through their wives, to fund these projects.

¶ 17. (C) Guliyeva explained that her constituency borders the territories currently occupied by Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, adding that her voters have to worry constantly about cease-fire violations. She shared her frustration that Parliament is left in the dark regarding the OSCE's Minsk Group negotiations and said that Parliament has requested more information from the President. (NOTE: Guliyeva is a former member of the opposition Musavat Party. Her continued presence as an alternate "opposition" member of the Azerbaijani PACE delegation is a constant source of contention for Parliament's opposition MPs.) Bakhshaliyeva, a former Deputy Speaker of Parliament, explained that her constituency is also near the territories occupied by Armenian forces and that the huge IDP/refugee burden is her district's biggest problem. According to Bakhshaliyeva, her district faces a serious water shortage because prior to the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories, the district's water came from an Armenian source. This source has since been cut off.

¶ 18. (C) Bakhshaliyeva told Ambassador Finley that Azerbaijan presently has a unique chance to build democracy, and if the GOAJ misses this chance, "future generations will never forgive us." Ambassador Finley encouraged the group to think about becoming more involved in fields beyond those

traditionally thought of as "women's issues." The group briefly discussed their experience as women in a political system still dominated by men. Abbasova said that she did not face any difficulty when campaigning for her seat in Parliament; she believes the political playing field is open. Akhundova said that she took part in a Council of Europe study on gender issues in the southern Caucasus. According to Akhundova, Azerbaijan has greater representation than Armenia and Georgia of women in traditionally male-dominated ministries, such as the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of National Security, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. But, she emphasized, there is still a glass ceiling at a certain level; Azerbaijan currently has no female ministers.

POLITICAL PARTIES GRIM ABOUT PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIZATION

¶ 19. (SBU) On March 30, the Ambassador hosted a dinner in honor of Ambassador Finley with political party leaders. Guests included opposition Musavat Party Chair Isa Gambar; opposition Popular Front Party (PFP) Chair Ali Kerimli; independent Yeni Siyaset (YES) bloc Chair Eldar Namazov; and independent Azerbaijan Democratic Reforms Party (ADRP) Chair and MP Asim Mollazade. (NOTE: Ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party Executive Secretary Ali Ahmadov was expected to attend, but declined at the last moment.)

¶ 110. (C) Mollazade outlined the ADRP platform, explaining that the party is a middle-class party made up of entrepreneurs and businessmen and that his members seek greater economic liberties. He said that the party promotes Euro-Atlantic integration, the protection of human rights and democracy, and greater anti-corruption efforts. According to Mollazade, the biggest obstacle to political and economic progress in Azerbaijan is the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Gambar told Ambassador Finley that Musavat is the oldest political party in Azerbaijan; that it was established in 1911 and has sought independence and freedom since the party's creation. He cautioned that GOAJ officials have "learned when and where to use democratic language," and explained that Musavat's position differs from the ruling party's more in action than in words. According to Gambar, there are three major differences between Musavat and the ruling party: supporting a real democracy versus an imitation of one; supporting a true market economy versus a corrupt one; and supporting authentic Euro-Atlantic integration versus a "dance with Washington and Moscow."

¶ 111. (C) Namazov explained that YES is a political bloc rather than a party, and is comprised of both political parties and independent experts. He said that the YES leadership is

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currently strategizing to develop its approach for the October 2008 Presidential Elections. Namazov said that three conditions must be in place to implement democratic reform in Azerbaijan: the President must have the political will to implement democratic reform; key GOAJ positions must be filled by a "team of reformers;" and the GOAJ must have a clear-cut democratization strategy. According to Namazov, none of these conditions is currently in place, and two main dangers exist: improper management of the oil revenue, which could destroy the economy, and the lack of democratic changes, which creates a gap from which religious fundamentalism could emerge. Namazov fears that Azerbaijan is in a situation where it could either turn into another Nigeria, or into "the Shah's Iran."

¶ 112. (C) Kerimli pointed out that each guest present at the dinner had been in the original Popular Front movement that backed President Albuafaz Elchibey in the early stages of Azerbaijan's post-USSR independence. He referenced the conclusion in the 2006 Human Rights Report that the Azerbaijani people do not have a reasonable chance of changing the government democratically, asking how a political party can function normally in such a system.

Kerimli explained that the opposition has tried many times, unsuccessfully, to use civil resistance methods to get its point across. According to Kerimli, citizens have no role in governance, particularly because Parliament does not provide oversight to the executive, and because MPs are not held accountable to their constituents. He believes that a solution will begin with fair and free elections.

¶13. (C) The group engaged in a robust discussion on the democratic situation in Azerbaijan. Gambar pointed out that the Heydar Aliyev regime came to power as a result of a military coup, not through democratic elections. He outlined the major problems on the human rights and democracy front: political prisoners, severely restricted freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, a weak and ineffective Parliament, and the limited ability of political parties to operate. Gambar noted that other countries, like North Korea, face more serious problems than Azerbaijan, but asked if the opposition should wait for the country to become completely totalitarian before taking action. According to Gambar, the GOAJ allows democratic freedoms to exist only to the extent that they do not threaten its power. Kerimli said that President Ilham Aliyev was considered "the great reformer" when he came to power, but has done nothing but make excuses for his lack of action to implement democratic reforms.

¶14. (C) Mollazade painted a different picture; he said that the situation in Azerbaijan is not black and white. According to Mollazade, the GOAJ is "semi-authoritarian." He argued that Azerbaijan has a relatively free print media but television reporting is not balanced. Mollazade believed there is a group of people trying to prevent Azerbaijan from democratizing, trying to "stir up problems with the West." But, he emphasized, even within the ruling party there are democratic-minded people. Mollazade recognized that there is a very narrow political space for the opposition to operate, but he said that they still have some opportunities. He said that Azerbaijan's quest for democracy is the responsibility of Azerbaijanis, but that they need international support to implement major democratic changes.

¶15. (U) Ambassador Finley cleared this message.
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